Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Is This Good Company?

Nicole Brydson · Wednesday, February 17th, 2016

On the first Monday of 2016, an event post on Facebook caught my eye. A small, unknown gallery in Bushwick, Brooklyn, where I live, announced it would be kicking off a year-long search for the neighborhood's 200 most influential people across categories that included art, nightlife, bars, restaurants and real estate with an event the following Friday. Seemingly business as usual for self-appointed neighborhood 'influencers,' the post drew resentment for what has come to be understood as the colonialist nature of gentrification-by-art.

If you've been in Bushwick lately, you might have noticed it is under a lot of pressure. Cranes and construction prod concrete on every other block. New businesses considered the 'first wave' of gentrified Bushwick have turned over to new, bigger businesses. Leases are expensive, and extended ones hard to come by for businesses or residential homes. Likely, if you have a good deal it is either lucky, almost over, or both.

The L train's Williamsburg floodgates have long been open to Bushwick – known for some time as the edgy East Williamsburg – all while folks from around the world have been immigrating to the neighborhood, citing affordability, creativity, collaboration, energy, urbanity as some of its most exciting draws. Like all things Brooklyn vs. Manhattan, affordability is always relative to our island brethren, instead of based in the reality of Brooklyn.

Two indie films were recently made about the neighborhood's new realities: *Bizarre*, named for a local performance art bar, and *White Girl*, well, because there are so damn many of us. A new dorm-style hotel called BKLYN House sits just south of Flushing Avenue, proclaiming it will provide a "Bushwick-inspired experience." A company called Upper Class Development LLC is building its neighbor, a new condo building with a view of the adjacent government-subsidized Bushwick Houses and Woodhull Hospital – where Google reviews warn anyone mapping this location to "never go here." High and low living, side by side, are the new urban cocktail of community, poverty hidden below the surface of luxury, while residents of the community across the spectrum stay siloed in buckets: long-time resident to self-selected 'influencers.'

The host of the questionable event listing, one Rafael Fuchs, is an 'early arrival' art gentrifier who rents a space for his eponymous gallery in the BogArt, a building full of studios and a few galleries off the L train's Morgan Avenue station at 56 Bogart Street. It is one of the neighborhood's most visible studio buildings. Fuchs is one of at least a dozen people in Bushwick, and a sea of people across the city, who run a gallery named for themselves in a neighborhood they recently came to inhabit, usually within the last decade, often within the last five years. Frequently the neighborhood's street art mural curators – or the owners of walls – are criticized for showing mostly artists who hail from outside of the neighborhood, using the area's cachet in the media to sell art made by a transient artist class from around the world.

In Fuchs' case, he seemed to be estimating that 2016 was the time to establish the power hierarchy

for a nascent ‘cultural district’ (as the City of New York would like it to be). Many fractured and overlapping groups organize around art, but no overarching power structure has yet emerged in the new Bushwick arts community. There are many diverse niches of creativity and craft that are struggling to rise with the tide of their neighborhood from across the spectrum of native local person to I-just-got-here-yesterday.

A few neighborhood friends had also noticed the event listing, and comments started popping up in my Facebook newsfeed. What were its standards and who would be selecting the list of 200? What was the point of the event? Especially when the neighborhood brand seemed to be saturating the media.

“The point of the project is to highlight people who are innovative and adding a positive aspect in their field,” Fuchs wrote on the page when I questioned him. The hollowness of these words rang around my brain for a minute.

What became very clear, very quickly, was that follow up questions like, ‘How do you define innovative? What is influence? Who is on your advisory panel?’ were not on the table. For the first hour or so, they were ignored. The eventual response from Fuchs was that he wanted to make the list to “keep us on our toes.” He claimed it was not a “social project” – implying it did not require standards or criteria.

The next day a craigslist ad for a studio sublease in the same building at 56 Bogart proclaimed, “I have participated in Bushwick Open Studios and I get roughly 1,000 visitors daily to my studio [during the festival]. This in my opinion is maximum exposure for the weekend and you will not regret being part of the incredible arts that go down, in and outside of the immediate area.” The listing price for the 600 square foot studio is $1,200 a month, but only for the next year, before the existing five year lease is up.

Art festivals like Bushwick Open Studios, run by the organization Arts in Bushwick, for whom my company Misfit Media built a website and continues to work with, are increasingly creating this kind of pressure in the communities they aim to serve. In the case of Arts in Bushwick, a deep and difficult discussion about gentrification during the 2015 Bushwick Open Studios workshop, discussions evolved that resulted in a dramatic months-long discussion and almost full turnover in the volunteer organizer core. The soon to be announced 2016 programming for Arts in Bushwick will look dramatically different for this reason alone. The whole process begged the questions: Are we doing more harm than good? What is our purpose and intention?

Bushwick and Gowanus are often compared for their arty, industrial grit and in 2015, a similar organization in Southern Brooklyn, Arts in Gowanus, addressed issues of artists losing studio space, but failed to recognize that their first wave favored-tenants status was over, and the second wave of gentrification was biting at their heels. The truth is, the term ‘artist’ is a nebulous description, which somehow assumes infinite levels of integrity. Are they the political dissidents that might have smeared elephant shit on a painting at the Brooklyn Museum back in the day, or are they the hotel-lobby decorators whose commercial rent is much cheaper in Bushwick? What is an artist? Does it matter?

This year it seems that a lot of the five-year leases, signed at the beginning of Bushwick’s shark-jumping wave in 2010-2011, are starting to come up for renewal. In the time since they were signed, the neighborhood’s cachet has gone up an estimated 1000% (that’s just science). Tech moved here. Street art happened. Brands like Famous in Bushwick have popped up. Bushwick’s most famous mom, my friend and Arts in Bushwick volunteer, Nina ‘Need-A-Mom’ Keneally, went viral in her plight to mentor the youth in 2015. Bushwick is a place where millennials go and make art. *It. Was. Decided.*

The people who do most of Brooklyn’s local media coverage these days are usually not from New

York and might be students or have been on the job for less than a year. Most, like Bushwick Buzz, have no value to offer, just want to sell advertising off their neighborhood's cool factor, and will harass community members by any social media means necessary to buy in. Much of what claims to be news is content and not journalism. Bushwick is often called East Williamsburg by the media when there is crime reported in it, and Bushwick when the discussion shifts to arts and culture coverage. People who have never been to Bushwick or who just got here will not know the difference anyway, and they are the people for whom this content is written. They who control the media, control the dialogue. I know this well, as a local journalist and publisher of BrooklynTheBorough.com, the only local media pages without advertising.

A local website called *Bushwick Daily*, founded in 2010, has cozied up to the new advertising money in Bushwick with a blog and a print magazine, exalting the area's edgiest – read, approved – entrepreneurs, business owners, and generally avoiding anything related to the native Bushwick population or real community news coverage at all costs. Even going so far as ignoring the Fuchs conversation as virulent racism happened on their very own Facebook page, by a guy who was TEDxBushwick's first speaker on the topic of gentrification.

However, even blogs with low standards have some standards – or maybe just advertisers – and a list of influencers is generally their provenance. It made more sense when *Brooklyn Magazine* ran a similar concept in 2014, that mostly went ignored except by venture capitalists and real estate developers who sponsor things like the Brooklyn Film Festival and Northside Festival. They need to attract large quantities of people to the neighborhoods in which they have built the same luxury condo buildings over and over again. They also need those neighborhoods to be cool, and proclaim 'diversity' as quintessential modern amenity.

Creating a hierarchical list within an art space that needs collectors to pay rent and survive is a pretty good clue that nepotism is lurking around the corner. It sheds light on the lengths to which some people might go to cozy up to interests of development as a means to stay in the neighborhood they feel they have built (pioneer syndrome), in order to have a career. So who were Fuchs' collectors/sponsors? What were his standards? Were good intentions all he needed, and why should we all assume that he has them? Also, why was he posting an unrelated Livestream product announcement on the event page? It was basically advertising their ability to host TED-style events, a nod to the newest community franchise to hit Brooklyn, TEDxBushwick. A similarly heated discussion about gentrification broke out at their event in fall 2015, but was swept under the rug and video never released.

Many people felt the Fuchs Projects event description lacked transparency about who was involved besides Rafael Fuchs – the creator of, and the only artist represented, on the page. Was he just trying to create a buzz for himself and his friends? Or was it more nefarious than that, with corrupt connections to the forces behind the cranes and general pressure points being pushed all over Bushwick? That's still unclear. What became clear, however, was that he had not followed his plan through to its logical consequences.

"Do you understand why it is problematic to make hierarchical lists in a neighborhood in which developers are using artists to rapidly displace residents who have been here for generations?" I asked on the event page.

"Our case is mutually close to home, since I might have to also find a new home," Fuchs responded, as if having to find a new apartment after ten years in the neighborhood was comparable to Bushwick local Anthony Rosado's family potentially losing a multi-generational family home.

This tone-deaf response was nothing compared to the barrage of comments and eventual harassment that came from people outside the neighborhood claiming to be Fuchs' supporters. Namely, pro-gentrification Park Slope gallery owner Ethan Pettit, a TEDxBushwick speaker,

whose reputation has him close to the police, media and political hacks throughout Lower Manhattan and Brooklyn. His long internet history is documented across local blog comments and randomly sourced arts photography on New York City neighborhoods he colonized in the previous century. Fuchs is sort of a Pettit 2.0, but where Fuchs was generally just tone-deaf in the conversation, Pettit was straight-up racist: accusing community members who questioned the purpose of the event of being ignorant and speaking in tongues at church on Sunday.

Another commenter, Mark D'Ottavio, a man with a court-documented history of online harassment living in Colorado, chimed in and started trolling me and a few other people personally. I posted a single triptych photo of Fuchs and supporters after the harassment started, to show the community with whom we were dealing – three middle-aged white men from other places. D'Ottavio then posted my headshot photo with a defamatory and libelous message and started incessantly posting what became a severely fucked-up rape fantasy-slash-accusation against my defenders. It felt like I punched a glass ceiling and a bunch of trolls fell out.

I suddenly realized this was the only time these sides of the gentrification conversation were meeting in dialogue: reading messages on social media, usually alone.

Fuchs deleted much of the original back and forth from the event page, and eventually cancelled the event. Afterward, the discussion moved to *Bushwick Daily*'s Facebook page, where a blog post on the incident was posted. Only Fuchs, their friend, was interviewed for the article, so I offered to speak with the writer as counter balance. This was ignored, and despite the ugliness that persisted on the *Bushwick Daily* post for a week, the blog has yet to report on any of it, sticking only with Fuchs' official statements.

Gothamist, *DNA Info*, *Bedford + Bowery*, and *The Brooklyn Paper* also reported about the incident. Two of those publications called me, the others did not; my Facebook comments and images were used without permission by *Bedford + Bowery* until a correction ran. Few have taken the time to carefully weigh the situation at hand, dismissing it with the permissible what-did-you-expect-would-happen reaction. But this is not just an argument: it is a microcosm of what's happening in all neighborhoods facing similar pressure—conversations about power and access and voice in local communities are taking place in the media. Most reporters I spoke with acted as if they have done their job, by opting for the easy, clickbaitable, he said/she said back and forth coverage-without-context that basically reads, 'Racism happened here.'

The Village Voice went with something called "Hipster-led" gentrification in their headline—a poorly worded and undermining accusation against the new people that they are the ones who are building condos and changing the neighborhood's residential and commercial zoning laws. In fact, it is the city and its business partners, chambers of commerce, economic development corporations (EDCs), business improvement districts (BIDs), and their non-profit partners who are pushing the change.

Why was it so hard to see the full picture of what is happening here communicated in the media?

The pressure we are all facing is literally crawling through our screens. Our click-driven media is segregated in a way that reflects the state of our society and the media have no real incentive or ability to cover gentrification-related racism in a thoughtful way. The good/bad binary makes this so: if you are racist you are bad/if you are not racist, you are good. The underlying implication of most local coverage is 'gentrification is good, no gentrification is bad.' Or, when forced to acknowledge racism, the storyline reads simplistic and naive, almost antagonizing readers, especially those of us with institutional knowledge of our community.

Neither assumption is true. Otherwise good people can do racist things, and gentrification is not the only way to improve a neighborhood that creates ownership and access for all. Usually

‘improvement’ and ‘revitalization’ mean a new class of people is getting ready to move in, and people who were there before understand the nice new things were not built for them. The reality is that all of us are racist, we are all born of a racist system here, and elsewhere, it is a fact of the world. Racist systems create biases on all sides that need recognition and healing. Stereotypes are bad no matter who they are about or from which direction they are flung.

We all lose when interests that do not want residents to have a productive conversation about gentrification are the benefactors of most of Brooklyn’s media coverage. See *Bushwick Daily*, *Brooklyn Magazine*, *Brownstoner*, *Brokelyn* – whom are all on the dole for real estate ads and powered by BlankSlate, the web and branding company most closely affiliated with the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce and its real estate partners.

Segments of audience, based on class and race, are sold as demographic categories for advertising media. The demographic narrative that boasts the most return drives local blogs: mostly white, new residents from mostly middle or upper class backgrounds considered hipsters; the coveted 18-49 [white] demographic. It may be subtle, or reflect the realities of a racist society, but it is also a driving force behind the voice and tone of blog media in the gentrified space. Their audience is who they perceive their advertisers want to connect with, and those advertisers do not want to see anything but intense engagement. Media has no incentive to desegregate their narrative. What could be more engaging than a fight about racism and gentrification in Brooklyn in 2016?

The coverage that follows tends to be highly tone deaf to the realities of living in a rapidly changing community in Brooklyn (or San Francisco, what’s up SoMA and Mission friends), but somehow right on top of all the new amenities a neighborhood might have coming up. The implication underlying this content is that if you cannot afford to live in a gentrified neighborhood, you do not deserve to; the full realization of meritocracy. Those of us who can read between the lines are increasingly under pressure from this invisible messaging. People who have lived in Bushwick for generations are excluded from the new neighborhood conversation and power dynamics, and have to fight their way into siloed Facebook networks, local blog media and unaffordable app related technology. Or become a task rabbit.

In the Fuchs debacle, my friend Yazmin Colon, who critiqued the project on the event page, was already blocked from *Bushwick Daily*’s Facebook page and so was excluded completely from the conversation that affected her community when it shifted to that space because she had previously criticized the editor of the blog. Following that logic, is Facebook private or public space?

The debate in Bushwick drew out the underlying framework by which the transient transnational artist class uses to prop up the blind notion, pushed by press release media, that their presence is improving a community. It was one blip in an ongoing conversation in Bushwick and across the country and world about how these rapidly changing communities should evolve and what role art should play in that evolution.

What came to light was there are people in the process of gentrification who call themselves artists, and are blind to the exclusionary pressure they put on other people they never recognized as fully existing in the first place. When challenged they react with fight or flight, as it was in 1977 when Bushwick’s white-flight era took off, and many Italian families fled in the aftermath of rioting and looting during the New York City blackout that year.

As was the case with Fuchs’ reaction: first we got flight, then we got the fight. These internet warrior-trolls are the quintessential purveyors of the myth of gentrification, related often through blog media, that ‘there was nobody here before’ or ‘there was nothing here.’ Just as in the beautiful landscape paintings of America during the Manifest Destiny period: white people chose to depict the breathtaking landscapes and not necessarily the bodies strewn about them.

If you read this far, congratulations, you want to be an informed participant in this uncomfortable conversation. Those who can get comfortable with their own discomfort will know the true

meaning of being a New Yorker.
If you're still feeling defensive, read more about White Fragility, consider American history, all the 'pioneers' who came before you, all the businesses and condos that use the word colony, and ask yourself, is this good company? All else will follow.

This article also appears on Nicole's site, BrooklynTheBorough.com.
Images: Screen shots via Nicole Brydson and information on Nicole's meme series, Because Capitalism, is available at becausecapitalism.org. In Nicole's words, "The 'Because' meme series is a direct response to the experience of living and working in Bushwick, and Brooklyn generally, over the last twelve years."

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